

Until Death

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Summary: Marriage is for life, not just for Valentine's Day â€“ unless they both amount to the same thingâ€¦ This is the next episode in my Sherlolly Saga, a sequel to 'Fatal Breath' and 'Holmes for Christmas'. Rated T. *Contains scenes that some people may find upsetting.*

1. Until Death - The Prologue

Marriage is for life, not just for Valentine's Day â€“ unless they both amount to the same thingâ€¦

Until Death

by

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Prologue

'Three cheers for the happy couple!' yelled one of the guests, enthusiastically, and all those assembled on the gravel driveway complied as the car carrying the newly-weds pulled away. The couple gave a final wave through the rear window then settled back in their seats, each breathing a sigh of relief. They were married! It was done!

It had been a happy day but a hectic one and they were both relieved to be alone together, at last. They glanced, briefly, into each other's eyes as their hands met and their fingers entwined.

'Spouses for life', the celebrant had said.

'Until death do us part,' they had replied.

They smiled at the shared memory and leaned in for a tender kiss.

At the end of the driveway, the chauffeur turned left and drove through the village, the windshield wipers slapping vigorously from side to side. That was the only blot on an otherwise perfect day. The rain that had fallen relentlessly for the previous month had not let up, even for this special occasion, forcing the guests to resort to wellingtons and raincoats. But it had not marred the joy of the day. And in a few hours, the newly-weds would be in southern Italy, beginning their married life with a week-long honeymoon.

The wedding car approached the ancient stone bridge in the centre of the village. The normally gentle, meandering river had been transformed, by the unusually heavy and prolonged precipitation, into a raging torrent and here, where the four hundred year old bridge funnelled the water though its narrow single arch, the roar of the racing water could be heard even inside the car.

The chauffeur slowed to check for oncoming traffic, as the bridge was only wide enough for traffic to cross in one direction at a time. There was nothing approaching from the other side so the driver slipped the car into first gear and eased forward onto the bridge.

Even as he did so, there was strange grating, growling, rumbling sound and the car shook and shuddered. Looking out through the windscreen, the driver watched in stunned surprise as the low parapet on the left side of the river crossing seemed to split, in a zig-zag path, along the cracks between the blocks of masonry. But as the split reached the roadway, it didn't stop. It continued on, across the tarmac surface and the bridge cracked in two, across the apex.

The car continued to creep forwards, the driver transfixed by the strange events unfolding around him. As the front wheels rolled over the crack in the road, the rear end of the vehicle seemed to dip and twist.

'Drive on! Drive on!'

The driver was shaken from his shocked stupor by the voices of his passengers, yelling from the back seat, but it was too late. The sheer force of the current had weakened the underside of the construction and the weight of the wedding car was the final straw. As the bridge split, the roadway collapsed into the roiling water, dragging the vehicle with it. It plunged backwards into the maelstrom and was swept away, downstream.

ooOoo

Up at the big house, the phone in the front hall rang out.

Andrew, Mycroft Holmes' valet cum butler, lifted the receiver.

'Colbert House,' he intoned.

ooOoo

A huge thank you to all my readers, especially those who have reviewed, faved and followed this latest episode in my Sherlolly Saga! After such a long hiatus, I thought you would all have forgotten about me. I should have known better. We Sherlock fans are good at waiting! :)

Chapter One

The black Land Rover Freelander manoeuvred along the narrow village street and turned into the gravel driveway leading to the village hall and its car park. It drew to a halt in a vacant space, alongside several other 4x4 vehicles belonging to local farmers, most of whom were tenants of the Holmes estate. Switching off the Freelander's engine, the driver turned and nodded greetings to the occupants of the vehicles on either side then looked towards the group of people huddled under their umbrellas, outside the village Primary school, across the road.

Friday was Arthur's day to do the school run, it being a home study day for his Psychology Degree course. He didn't usually drive the school run – he usually ran. It was only a mile, after all, from Colbert House to the village of Colbert St Mary so he normally jogged there, and then he and the children would walk back, across the fields, enjoying the fresh air and the sights and sounds of the countryside. But it had been raining almost non-stop for days, if not weeks, and the fields were completely waterlogged, the thick mud ankle deep, so Arthur had borrowed the Estate Manager's 4x4 to collect the children from school.

Through the rain-obscured windscreen, Arthur observed the huddle outside the school gate. He knew all of the villagers by sight, if not by name, as many of them were tenants of the estate, too. The Holmes estate was a large and thriving business, the largest employer in the area, and it was owned by Arthur's partner – soon to be husband – Mycroft Holmes.

It never ceased to amaze Arthur that the man who had inherited this vast estate, while still in his mid-twenties, and managed to hold it all together – despite the crippling inheritance tax that the government had levied on its assets – and turn it into a thriving business whilst, at the same time, carving out a highly successful career in the Civil Service and taking care of his wild-child little brother! This man had chosen him – lowly little Arthur Brocklehurst from Stalybridge – to be his life partner. He really had to pinch himself, sometimes.

Arthur was roused from his reverie by the sound of his text alert pinging. He fished his mobile phone from his pocket and saw that the sender was Mycroft himself. The senior Holmes brother rarely used text, preferring the spoken word to the written. The fact that he was texting now suggested he was most likely in the middle of a meeting – and messaging under the table – so, with that image in mind, Arthur opened the text and read it with a smile.

Shutting up shop early. Home in an hour. England can manage without me for the weekend.

That was not strictly true, of course, since the man who practically was the British Government was permanently on call, where ever in the world he happened to be, but it was good that he would be 'working

from home', at least.

Arthur's eye was caught by the movement forward of the huddle by the school gate, a sure sign that said gate had been unlocked to admit the waiting parents and carers to collect their charges.

'That's good to hear. Come soon,' he replied, as he pulled up the hood on his Gore-Tex jacket and climbed out of the Freelander, pocketing the phone as he jogging across the street and joining the group of people funnelling through the narrow opening, into the Nursery playground, sharing pleasantries and comments about the weather as they went.

'Not long now, Mr Arthur, before you and His Lordship tie the knot?'

Arthur recognised the speaker as one of the ladies who did casual work for events up at the 'big house' which was how the local people referred to Colbert House, Mycroft's ancestral home. He nodded and smiled, almost coyly.

'Yes, just over two weeks,' he replied.

He still found it strange to hear his partner referred to as 'His Lordship', a title Mycroft never used in either his public or private life. But to the people of Colbert St Mary and the Holmes estate, he was and always would be the 'lord of the manor'.

'I'll be sorry to miss it,' the woman went on, 'but my Alice is getting wed the same day, in the church here in the village. I can hardly miss my own daughter's wedding, now can I?' she chuckled.

'No, of course not,' Arthur agreed and made a mental note to remind Mycroft to send a gift to the village newlyweds, in keeping with a long-standing feudal tradition. 'We'll save you a slice of our wedding cake,' he added, with a grin.

'Oooh, thank you!' the woman trilled. 'And I'll save you a slice of ours! Oh, I think it's your turn.'

Looking across to the open door to the Nursery classroom, Arthur saw that the teaching assistant was beckoning him to come forward. He spotted Charlie standing beside the TA, swathed in his waterproofs and clutching his school bag.

'Eh up, Charlie!' he greeted the little boy and Charlie's face lit up with delight.

'Poppah!' he squealed, throwing himself into Arthur's outstretched arms. 'Poppah, it's been waining all day! We had to stay in again at playtime and watch 'Bwum' onna DVD!'

'Is that right?' Arthur exclaimed. 'Brum' was one of Charlie and Katy's favourite kids' TV shows. The children had the box set at home but never tired of watching it, over and over again.

Standing upright and taking Charlie by the hand, Arthur smiled at the TA.

'I expect you'll be glad to get shut of them all for the weekend,' he quipped, having observed clear evidence of cabin fever in Charlie's demeanour and multiplied it by the number of children in the class -- and this was only the afternoon group!

'It has been a very long, wet week,' the TA agreed, with a wry smile.

'Where's your sister got to?' he asked Charlie, looking round the classroom, still quite well populated with small children.

'Oh!' exclaimed the TA. 'She was here a moment ago. Let me go and find her. Katy Holmes!' she called, walking away from the door.

'She's inna Quiet Corner,' Charlie announced. 'She's having a stwop,' he added, helpfully.

'Oh, dear,' Arthur mused, smiling inwardly at Charlie's use of the Northern idiom. 'What's that about?' he wondered aloud.

'I don't know,' Charlie replied. 'She tol' me to go away.'

Arthur sighed, shaking his head, as he made his way toward the Quiet Corner. Katy was a little prone to 'strops'. Perhaps being the only female in the family could be a little frustrating, even for a nearly-four year old. Arthur had personal experience of being the only boy in a largely female household so he knew how over-whelming that could be, at times, but at least he'd had his dad for back-up. Katy had the two nannies, of course, but perhaps that wasn't quite the same.

Katy had inherited all her father's strength of personality but had not, so far, developed any of his diplomatic skills. Temperamentally, she was a lot more like her Uncle Sherlock. Katy hated to lose. She would never back down in an argument and, if her adversary refused to yield, she could sulk for England. Charlie, the younger twin, was quite the opposite. He avoided confrontation at all costs and would yield at the first sign of losing ground. The twins' characters were as alike as chalk and cheese.

Arthur arrived at the Quiet Corner and looked over the top of the partition that screened the area from the rest of the room. Seated cross-legged, on the rug, arms folded and face set in a disgruntled scowl, Katy looked up and eyed him morosely. Then, as recognition dawned, she scrambled to her feet, rushing around the partition and flinging her arms around Arthur's legs.

'Poppah!' she sobbed. 'I HATE Stevie Needham!'

ooOoo

It took a few minutes to calm the weeping child and neither Arthur nor the class teacher, who appeared on the scene within moments of hearing Katy's loud emotional outburst, could persuade her to explain what exactly Stevie Needham had done to provoke such a dramatic reaction.

Stevie was the son of one of the villagers, the youngest of three children, all of whom attended the little village school. The family

had a bit of a bad reputation, amongst the locals. Mr Needham, who was a labourer on one of the estate's farms, spent most of his free time in the village pub and was known to have a rather heavy-handed approach to discipline, where the kids were concerned " and his wife, too, by all accounts. The older children were always in some sort of bother.

The child in question had already left for home so was not available to shed any light on what he may have done to upset Katy so Arthur decided it was probably best to take the twins home and continue this inquiry in the warmth and comfort of the cosy kitchen at Colbert House, over some of the cook's hot buttered tea cakes.

He took both children in hand and hurried off, through the still persistent downpour, to the Freelander, installing them in their child seats before climbing in himself, behind the steering wheel.

'All set?' he asked.

'Yes, Poppah,' Charlie replied. Katy just nodded and turned her face to look out of the window.

'Guess what?' Arthur exclaimed. 'Daddy's on his way home early!'

'Hurray! Daddy's coming home!' cheered Charlie, clapping his hands with delight. Katy turned to look at her Poppah, with an expression of hopeful anticipation. Arthur grinned back at both children, put the Freelander into gear and drove off.

By the time they arrived home, Katy's spirits seemed completely restored. She jumped from the back of the car and raced into the house, dumping her school bag on the hall floor, shedding her outdoor shoes and coat, and dashing off to the kitchen, where Mrs Orgreave would be in attendance, waiting to serve Afternoon Tea.

Arthur and Charlie followed at a more sedate pace and settled themselves at the farmhouse kitchen table, as the family cook served milk and tea and freshly baked toasted teacakes, spread with generous amounts of butter. Since Katy appeared to have recovered from her altercation with her classmate, Arthur concluded it was probably best to let sleeping dogs lie. They had the whole weekend ahead of them and, by Monday, the whole affair would most likely be completely forgotten.

ooOoo

End
file.